

Family Principles Guide Fourth-Generation Grocer

When RF Buche was four years old, he snuck out of his house in Gregory during a blizzard and walked through the snow just to spend time with his dad. His destination? The family grocery store.

“He told me I couldn’t go with him that day because there was a blizzard,” RF recalls. “I guess I didn’t listen.”

RF’s early passion for the business laid the foundation for his future. The fourth-generation retailer proudly carries on his family’s legacy ... and is already eyeing his eventual successor.

Be Our GEST

GF Buche Company has been a mainstay in South Dakota since 1905, when RF’s great-grandfather Gus opened his first store in Lake Andes. Today, the company operates grocery and convenience stores in 19 locations across the state. Auto parts, hardware, and lumber stores round out this mini empire on the prairie.

Any company that has been in business for over a century is doing something right. RF credits his success to wisdom he gleaned from his dad and grandpa.

“They taught me that the two most important things to do in business are taking care of your customers and taking care



RF Buche checks the meat department.

of your people,” he shares. “We have an expectation of customer service in our stores we call GEST, which stands for Greeting, Eye contact, Smile, Thank you. Our team, we treat like family.”

These four guiding principles help Buche Foods stand apart in the crowded grocery business.

“Obviously, everybody has the same can of Van Camp’s Pork and Beans to sell,” RF explains. “My dad taught me a long time ago that you’ll go broke trying to be the cheapest all the time. We focus on fair pricing but differentiate ourselves with our service. We also invest back in our communities.”

Several employees have retired after 40 or more years. RF believes their longevity is the result of the genuine care he has for his staff.

“Being able to communicate with them, to know what’s going on in their lives — that’s what keeps people working for us,” he says. “We try to make a difference in their lives.”

Proactive Approach Keeps Shelves Stocked

When COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020, grocery stores were one of the first places to feel the effects.

Between mask mandates, directional arrows, and shortages on everything





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from meat to toilet paper, shopping became a stressful experience for many. Buche Foods' proactive approach helped cushion the blow for customers in rural communities throughout South Dakota.

"We had the same challenges everyone had," RF says. "Product shortages, trying to determine what is and isn't safe, extra cleaning, a magnitude of things."

In order to tackle the problem head-on, Buche Foods began holding daily manager meetings in which each store discussed what was going on in their community, which products were hard to keep in stock, and what their customers were saying.

"Collaboratively, we came up with a recipe for success," RF explains. "We didn't have the outs and shortages other stores did and our customer satisfaction was high. We said, look, we aren't just here for ourselves and the bottom line; we're here for our customers and our community. We worked very hard, and it reinvigorated everybody."

One reason Buche Foods was able to avoid the product shortages that plagued so many other grocers was their ability to shift items around between stores. RF and his

team allocated product between higher- and lower-volume stores, shifting everything from cake mix to toilet paper where it was needed most. As a result, customers from Pine Ridge to Mission and Gregory were likely to find what they needed at Buche Foods, whether they shopped online or in person.

"We took every truckload we could get and moved it around all our stores," he says. "We didn't care what it cost us and if we were driving from Wagner to Gregory for one case of mac 'n cheese. It was a tough time and we wanted to keep everybody satisfied."

No Signs of Slowing Down

GF Buche Company is still going strong 116 years later and business shows no signs of slowing down.

"We're in a real growth pattern right now and will continue with it," RF says. "We're always looking for locations that fit our footprint and style."

When the day comes for RF to step down, he's confident there will be a fifth generation to take the reins. He and his wife Tammi have four children: Molly, Shannon, Gus, and Gracie. And with their first grandchild on the way, it isn't unreasonable to think there might be a sixth generation waiting in the wings. But RF says that's a ways off.

"I've been in this store since before I could walk and plan to keep charging ahead!"

Buche's Pine Ridge staff: Kraig Peterson, manager; Tamara Vocu and Rayelte Provost, customer service and check out.

